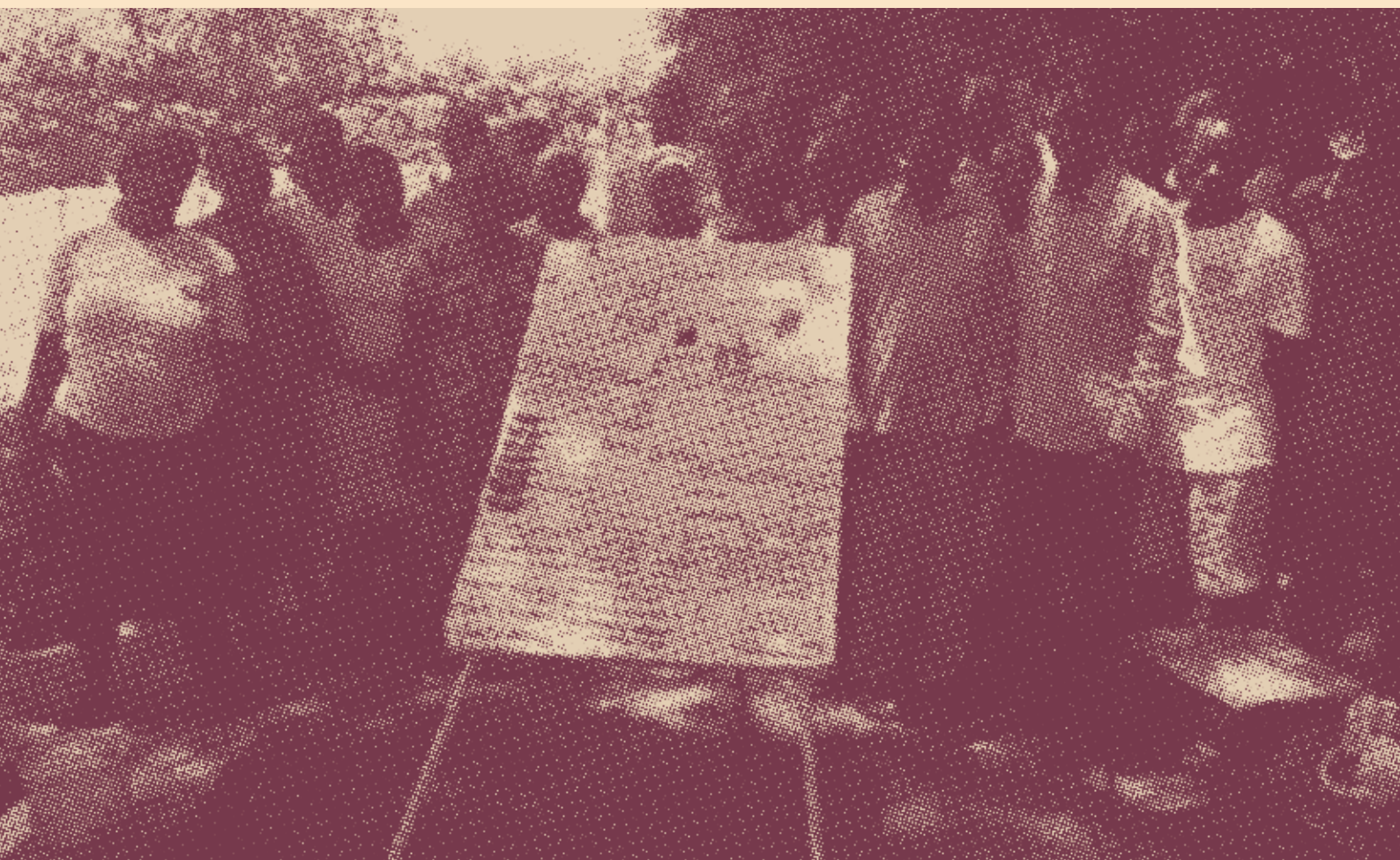

MAINSTREAMING EXPERIENCE CAPITALIZATION IN ZIMBABWE'S DEPARTMENT OF RESEARCH AND SPECIALIST SERVICES

Freeman Gutsa



Following the different steps of an experience capitalization process to produce various knowledge products, DR&SS has been able to raise the visibility of its agricultural development projects and innovations. As a result, improved bean varieties have been taken up by local smallholders and the Ministry of Agriculture has adopted a policy recommendation submitted by the Department.

Cover Identifying and prioritising cases

The agricultural sector is known for its potential to reduce poverty, create employment, improve food and nutrition security, enhance export earnings, improve people's livelihoods, and ultimately spearhead the socio-economic transformation of the country. The Department of Research and Specialist Services (DR&SS), a public research institution in Zimbabwe, works to promote a sustainable and viable agricultural sector through the development and dissemination of appropriate technologies, as well as knowledge and information systems. In this regard, many transformational initiatives by DR&SS – working together with partner institutions – have been implemented, and knowledge to sustainably empower extension services has been generated. Key innovations for farming communities, for example, are piling up, and research to influence policy is also growing.

Many valuable project experiences, success stories and lessons exist, but remain out of reach to those who may benefit from such information because they have not been captured and disseminated. As a result, similar failings are replicated across DR&SS projects and the projects of supporting institutions, even though there is a wealth of past experiences to learn from.

Experience capitalization may be the missing link in public research, given its potential to enable an organised learning process from past experiences, in a way that these are beneficial, not only to DR&SS,

but to agricultural research worldwide. Training workshops for facilitators of the capitalization approach were organised by CTA in Nairobi in November 2017 and in February 2018 in Arusha, and attended by representatives of different institutions. This article highlights the roadmap I followed, as facilitator of the process within DR&SS.

The stepwise journey

Our interest in mainstreaming the experience capitalization approach initially required a critical “reality check” to see how the DR&SS was structured, and to establish where the experience capitalization facilitator would fit within that structure. The CTA training equipped me with the best strategic tools and information to convince my colleagues and the DR&SS-supporting institutions of the need to facilitate experience capitalization processes. During the process, I supported various initiatives such as interfacing with the media to produce newspaper articles describing the capitalization approach. This went on until significant progress was made. With time, experience capitalization was not just championed by individuals, but included within the mandatory actions of all staff.

Any new development needs to be approved by the senior managers before it is passed on to the general

staff. In this way, I needed to discuss the capitalization initiative with the DR&SS directorate and get its approval. Following my training with CTA, internal discussions focused on the intention of institutionalising the process within DR&SS, the modalities for making it part of the system, the probable benefits, impact to the organisation's reputation, the extent to which the initiative may increase company awareness, and the costs involved. The key to securing the approval of the directors was to link experience capitalization to a specific gap within the institution — in this case a general worry around the external recognition of the added value of an organisation like DR&SS.

Within 3 months of the CTA training, approval for its institutionalization was granted by the directorate. The second phase was to introduce the concept to lower management, comprising the heads of the DR&SS institutes and the programme coordinators. Lastly, the concept was introduced to the project implementers and to all partner organisations. In total, 67% of the DR&SS staff became aware of the experience capitalization concept, including non-technical staff such as the finance and administration personnel. Identifying a “champion” within the directorate to promote the process was particularly difficult during this stage. They needed to be approachable, with a good track record (having convinced others to adopt new procedures), and they all had to have a good understanding of the capitalization concept.

Part of the conscientisation process at this stage involved holding extensive training sessions with staff. This was organised in July and August 2017, together with the International Centre for Tropical Agriculture and with funding from CTA. The training workshops ran under the theme: *Looking back at what we have done in*



the past, to do better in the future. The aim of the training was to show the benefits of an experience capitalization process at an individual and at an institutional level. A total of 26 participants attended the workshops. The cost of not adopting experience capitalization was clearly articulated and aroused interest among the participants. A booklet with an experience capitalization article describing a DR&SS project (on “innovation platforms”) was shared with all participants, showing the relative simplicity of the subject.

The institutionalization of any initiative won't succeed if appreciation at the individual level is not achieved. The training workshops had to make sure that participants understood the critical issues involved. The idea was to highlight the value of taking up the initiative at the employee level, and subsequently within the wider company. Besides recapping key aspects of the process, such as framing and planning, gathering and organising information, and analysing, documenting and sharing project data, the workshops

Above Mr Gumbomunda, a farmer, sharing the results of his works to the DR&SS staff

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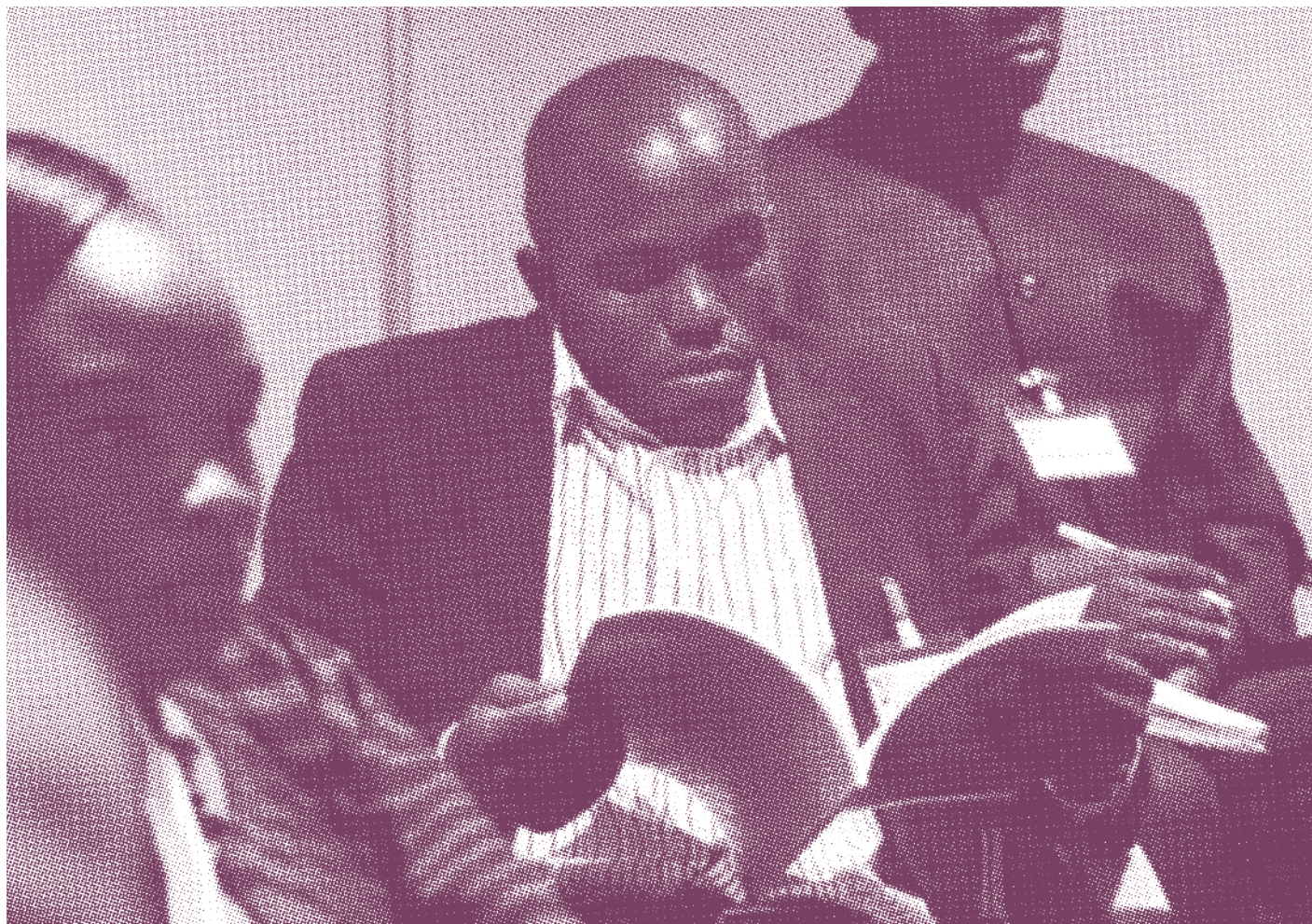
Below Many platforms were chosen to share information with all stakeholders, including the Journal of Agricultural Research and many agricultural shows

went as far as discussing how DR&SS should proceed in terms of mainstreaming the initiative. After presenting the benefits of an experience capitalization process, there was a clear understanding among the trainees of the advantages of adopting the process.

The next step involved planning how the institutionalization processes would be led, and creating a “movement” for the cause. It’s not an easy thing to internalise a new practice within an institution, and “champions” need to be brave enough to stand alone and instruct and direct other staff members. Those staff who were willing to adopt the approach played a key role helping others to also implement it. The turning point was the identification of a second staff member to act as a second “champion”. From this moment others joined, and as more and more people took up the approach, it became easier. In the process, me and my colleagues completed a few articles, followed by others and later by the majority of the DR&SS project team members.

Establishing support within the organisation

The general understanding was that to be able to fully, effectively and sustainably institutionalise experience capitalization, the right framework had to be developed. DR&SS had no existing unit to oversee knowledge management (KM), nor did we have a communications team. With the assistance of the DR&SS managers, a seminar was organised mid-2018 which culminated in the establishment of a KM unit. Selected individuals from different institutes in the department attended, and a team of nine members was selected to run the new unit. The selected members then organised a separate meeting where the Terms of Reference for the unit were established to cover the following:



Documentation is a key component of experience capitalization – as are M&E and impact assessments – but this is only part of the process.

- Oversee the development of a KM strategy, and coordinate the preparation of the work plan and budget;
- Improve the institutional appreciation of knowledge as an asset, the documentation of experiences as a requirement and sharing as a performance measure;
- Develop or adapt improved internet-based (website and portals) systems and other relevant tools and processes for the collection, processing/analysing, storing and sharing of created knowledge;
- Ensure that innovative experiences, lessons and good practices are captured, synthesised, documented and shared continuously to improve future performance and mitigation of known risks;
- Contribute to the department's efficiency and effectiveness, enhancing accessibility to knowledge from experiences encountered over the years;
- Disseminate relevant information to the right people, at the right time, and for the intended purpose;
- Facilitate the creation of a more adaptive, responsive, dynamic and flexible department, capable of unleashing new ideas and innovations;
- Support advocacy efforts by providing evidence of impact.

The good news

The institutionalization process has yielded great results in the Zimbabwean context. Impact was achieved through the commitment of the trained champion, the development of a clear roadmap, the support from the DR&SS leaders, the successful articulation of the benefits of inclusion and the costs of exclusion of the approach, the ability to create

followers and demonstrate value for the institution, and the establishment of guiding frameworks (e.g., KM unit) for sustainability. A vibrant website for DR&SS, including a KM web portal, as well as the Journal of Agricultural Research and agricultural shows, were identified as critical platforms for sharing experiences with stakeholders.

A DR&SS Publicity Committee was also established to ensure that activities carried out by the Department were publicised using different channels, such as television and radio programmes, as well as in educational dramas. To raise awareness of the experience capitalization approach and its benefits, KM has been included as a thematic area in the Harare agricultural shows, and the KM unit has, over the years, exhibited its products to more than 4,600 stakeholders visiting the DR&SS stand.

Since June 2018, the local newspaper, Newsday, has featured regular articles showing the organisation's projects and innovations, all of them generated through the experience capitalization approach. This has led to the completion of even more capitalization products, as more staff members are interested in joining after seeing the work of their colleagues published in the local newspaper. One of the stories published was about a new canning bean variety that was bred by the Department and which increased average bean yields from 1.5 tonnes to more than 5 tonnes per hectare. The interest shown by the farming communities meant a huge demand for the bean seeds.

Another effective capitalization product was a policy brief developed by DR&SS in May 2018, which was submitted to the Ministry of Agriculture, and which advocated for the adoption of an innovation platform approach in development initiatives. The brief led to the adoption of the recommended approach by the Ministry at a national level.

Right Participants at one of the DR&SS capitalization workshops, 31 July-3 August 2017



Key lessons learnt

One of the main lessons learnt is that writing case study articles requires different writing skills. The production of research documents is common practice among researchers. But writing documents which clearly articulate project experiences, and which target a broader audience, is best done following a step-by-step process.

At face value, participants of the experience capitalization training sessions interpret the approach as simply monitoring and evaluation (M&E) or impact assessment. Participants can also see no difference between experience capitalization and a documentation process. Documentation is a key component of experience capitalization – as are M&E and impact assessments – but this is only part of the process.

Another problem is that participants of the internal workshops who are assigned to write articles on previous project experiences are not able to find the information needed for completing the process.

This means that there has not been enough documentation before introducing the experience capitalization approach. Participants noted that the key steps of an experience capitalization process should start when an initiative starts, and not at the middle or when all activities are completed. For this to be achieved, the institutional adoption of experience capitalization is a critical step.



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